What You Need to Know About Getting Vaccinations With MS

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Is It Safe to Get Vaccinations With MS?

In my experience of having multiple sclerosis (MS), it’s not always clear on what's best for you. I’m constantly striving to improve my chances against such an aggressive opponent as MS, and I don’t think I always win.

I’m either looking for the next “big thing” in improving my situation from diet and exercise, taking vitamin supplements, to trying to avoid triggers that may cause a relapse or flare-up of my symptoms. For instance, I shy away from stress, and I am neurotic about avoiding germs and contracting illnesses that may make my MS symptoms worse.

While we’re not all as paranoid as me though, and it’s easy to forget sometimes that MSers get sick just like regular people. We’re often so preoccupied with MS that we forget our flare-ups can be caused by the common cold and flu, or an increase in body temperature.

For example, I remember an increase in strange bowel habits last year and presumed this was because of MS, but it turned out to be a prolapse caused by natural childbirth of two enormous babies! This problem is now fixed following surgery and just proves that not everything is MS related.

One way of reducing the impact that illnesses have on MS is by having vaccinations and protecting ourselves. Is this safe for us though and what should we be aware of? Some vaccinations are thought to trigger a relapse or flare-up, so what should be doing for the best and what’s safe?

Vaccinations are unavoidable sometimes, especially when we travel abroad to countries where diseases are prevalent, as it’s important we’re aware of the risks and benefits.

What Are the Risks Associated With Vaccinations and MS?

When you have MS, your immune system attacks your central nervous system, but disease-modifying drugs (DMDs) can manage the amount of inflammation in your body, reducing relapses or flare-ups. This is a careful balancing act that some vaccines can upset.

It’s also important to be aware that some vaccines, particularly the ones that contain small amounts of a live virus, can cause infection which could then trigger a flare-up.

Some DMDs also alter how your immune system works which could cause you to contract the disease they’re trying to prevent. Other treatments such as steroids can impact how well a vaccine works.

It’s always worth talking to your doctor and weighing up the risks against any benefits the vaccine will deliver.

Vaccines to Avoid With MS

As discussed above, some “live-virus” vaccines may be best avoided, and your doctor may advise against them.

- Flu shot (nasal spray)
- Yellow fever
- Rotavirus
- Typhoid
- Polio (oral vaccine)

The shingles vaccine may be safe if your body “knows” the virus due to having chicken pox, and the high dose flu vaccination may also be safe, although the effects for people with MS haven’t yet been researched.

Vaccines Considered Safe for People With MS

- Seasonal flu shot – when administered as an injection and only when it contains no live-virus
- Varicella (chicken pox)
- Tetanus
- Hepatitis B
- Pneumococcal vaccines.
- Human papillomavirus virus (HPV)
- Polio
- Measles-mumps-rubella (MMR)
- Rabies
- BCG
- Smallpox – although its effects on people with MS aren’t known, the risks of smallpox far outweigh any risks the vaccine may present so if there’s a chance you’re exposed to smallpox, you’ll need this shot.

Preparing Yourself Before Getting Vaccinations With MS

Before getting any shots, there are things you can do to be prepared.

- Talk to your doctor – make your doctor aware of DMDs you’re on so he knows the effect any live-virus shots will have.
- Look after your health – if you’re suffering from a relapse, it’s not a good idea to have vaccinations which may make it worse. You’ll need to wait four to six weeks for the relapse to fully clear.
- Stay away from sick people and make sure you wash your hands to prevent the spread of germs.
- Get plenty of rest and eat well.

Vaccinations are an important tool in our health care and there’s no doubt how important they are, especially when we travel abroad. Sometimes we need to weigh up the risks and benefits though to give ourselves the best chance of staying one step ahead of MS.

Anyone who’s experienced flu will have no doubt what a devastating impact it can have on MS so even if there’s a risk involved in vaccinating against it, I’d suggest those risks are outweighed by the benefits.

When in doubt, always talk to your doctor to get the best advice and be as prepared as you can be before getting any vaccinations with MS.